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Introduction to Work Based Learning at Middlesex University

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Since publishing our previous book about Work Based Learning¹ (WBL) there has been increasing interest in WBL in its many different forms throughout the UK and Europe, and Middlesex University has been a forerunner of a number of developments, often advising and contributing to national and international developments within the field. Within the UK Middlesex's unique approach to WBL was recognized by the award of a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Work Based Learning (CEWBL) in 2005 from the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), which provided the opportunity to take a strategic initiative in spreading WBL across the University, even within subject areas previously untouched by WBL. This book captures the progress of WBL since it gained the CEWBL for the work of the National Centre of Work Based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP) and Work Based Learning and Accreditation Unit (WBLAU) in the School of Health and Social Sciences and presents a range of stages of WBL from relative maturity to infancy across the university and subject areas. It presents stories from within the university which demonstrate a variety of growth and assimilation of WBL approaches and practices in different subject disciplines and explores some key issues that have arisen during this expansion. These may encourage practitioners elsewhere who have been striving to introduce and use WBL within their own academy but whose experiences may not have been plain sailing, or prepare others interested in developing WBL who may benefit from lessons learnt elsewhere.

Learning from work is not a new concept. Indeed, it formed the basis of many professional programmes from the middle ages where professions such as medicine and law developed their skills in practice and then took their learning into the academy to inculcate into new recruits coming into the profession and into the body of professional knowledge. Since then it has been taken up by other professions such as engineers, nurses and teachers, often starting as an apprenticeship model, but increasingly moving into delivery by higher education with the university defining the curriculum and mode of study. In the latter part of the 20th century other forms of work based learning began to emerge, largely in the form of continuing professional development training for post qualifying professionals, but with the curriculum being determined by professional bodies or advances in technology. Whilst the commonest application has been within vocational subjects, the work of Middlesex has demonstrated that it's not just about vocationally orientated subjects, but includes a wider interpretation of professional development and learning through work itself.

Work based learning was pioneered by Middlesex University following a research project which explored the curriculum in the workplace in the early 1990's which found that learning was organised and built upon the activities and relationships at work (Portwood

¹ Portwood D. & Costley C. (2000) Work Based Learning and the University: New Perspectives and Practices SEDA paper 109. Available on line at: <http://www.mdx.ac.uk/wbl/research/pubs.asp>

2000). Workers had to demonstrate learning in order to be appointed to a particular job, but then had to improve their proficiency and knowledge in order to remain in post. This perspective became the basis from which the Middlesex work based learning studies curriculum developed, ranging from undergraduate certificate level, through post graduate, and eventually doctorate level study. The introduction of modularisation and credit transfer schemes across the UK contributed to the solidarity of the programme as they provided a framework in which programmes could be structured using a straightforward but innovative approach of four main curriculum components, which build upon the learner's experience and were guided by the learner's professional and personal learning needs. These programmes have been running successfully within a niche, non traditional student market since their inception in 1993, supplemented by the introduction of the doctoral programme in 1998. The development of the programme and underlying philosophies and methodologies are explored fully in Portwood & Costley (2000), but we are aware that as time moves on, perspectives change and grow in order to respond to internal and external drivers, some of which, like Leitch (DfES 2006) have had significant influences on the uptake and interpretation of WBL approaches.

The unusual approach that Middlesex has taken to WBL is rooted in the notion that WBL is a 'field of study' in it's own right, rather than just a 'mode' of study (Portwood 2000), which allows each individual to create their own individually negotiated programme starting with accrediting their learning from work, where work itself becomes the discipline subject, rather than traditional subject disciplines. Portwood (2000) makes the case for WBL as a subject of study wherein learning from the work perspective means it is a social activity within a specific context. Additionally drawing on some of the adult learning theories (e.g. Knowles 2005) and humanistic theory (Rogers 1983), it includes aspects such as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) and the context of learning, and considers work as the main focus of learning activity rather than just a training experience or a placement activity. It includes learning from voluntary, domestic and unpaid activity too which distinguishes it from other WBL programmes elsewhere that focus on the application of subject discipline knowledge and professional development per se. Another distinctive characteristic which has become more apparent particularly since the Doctorate programme was established, is the impact of the WBL project and the contribution that WBL projects make in relation to knowledge management for both learner and organisation through planned organisational change and development activities. The knowledge that is generated through the WBL project rarely lies in any one academic discipline and as such becomes contested as it lies outside accepted academic traditions and epistemologies, thus challenging a number of traditional views within academia regarding the origins of knowledge.

The current definition of WBL as understood and used by Middlesex is:

"A learning process which focuses University level critical thinking upon work, (paid or unpaid) in order to facilitate the recognition, acquisition and application of individual and collective knowledge, skills and abilities, to achieve specific outcomes of significance to the learner, their work and the University"

(Garnett 2004, Inaugural lecture)

This definition has considerably developed the notion of WBL since Boud & Solomon (2001:4) stated:

“WBL is the term being used to describe a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in work places”. Learning opportunities have always been available at work; perhaps the difference is that now, more areas are recognizing the potential within these learning activities and are aiming to exploit and capitalise upon them.

The simplest definition usually links learning to the work role, and identifies three strands; learning for, through and at work (Seagraves et al 1996) indicating a variety of learning activities which can be linked to work based learning and different distinguishing features of each strand which range from vocational training or in-house training which reflect the learning acquired through doing the job, i.e. being ‘at’ work, whereas that learning ‘for’ work is more closely related to the concept of professional development, now often provided by Higher Education, whereas ‘through’ work utilizes the HE perspective of developing critical skills, analysis of knowledge and application of learning which can be fostered within HE (Brennan & Little 1996), and which Garnett (2004) identifies as being the critical thinking skills which contribute to the significant outcomes for both learner and organization.

The Core Curriculum

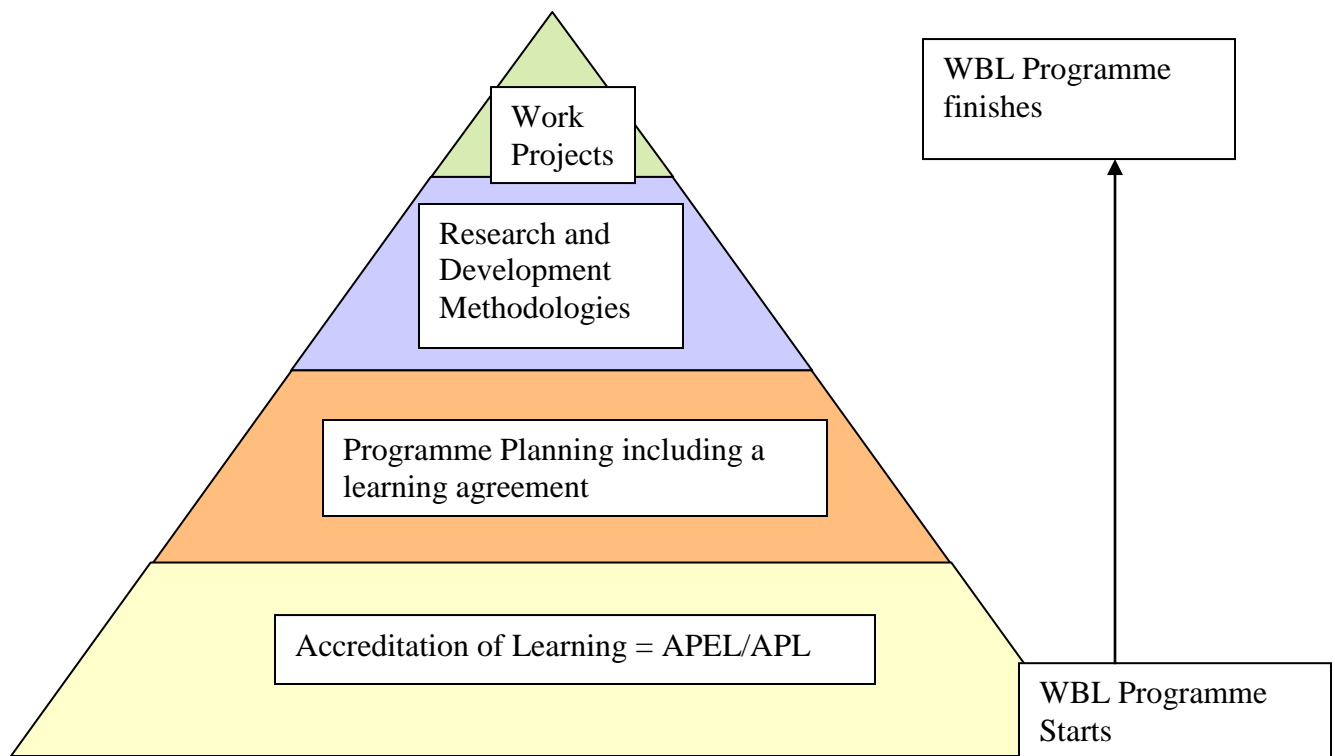
The WBL curriculum at Middlesex University has four core components which are consistent through each validated pathway, and which have shaped the unique approach to WBL. The starting point is reflection upon one’s own learning leading to accreditation of prior experiential or certificated learning (APE/CL), which provides the foundation of the study programme. Accreditation may be awarded for an individual’s experiential learning or formal learning that is validated or accredited organisational training or similar. The underlying assumption is that the individual has learnt valuable, university level learning elsewhere and does not need to repeat it through formal HE routes to prove it, but can demonstrate it through various sources of evidence which may be formal certificates or evidence from work. The doctoral programme differs in that the first stage focuses upon a review of previous learning, which identifies key areas from which to make accreditation claims for previous learning. In all programmes, the learner presents experiential learning and must demonstrate against specific level criteria equity with higher education level learning. For many learners, this process is highly significant, as it enables recognition of their personal and professional development, often achieved over an adult lifetime, and enables them to take stock of, and appreciate their achievements.

Having started the programme with a review and accreditation of learning, the learner plans future steps by determining what s/he requires both personally and professionally, designing a learning agreement with their sponsor or employer who supports the learner through the rest of the programme and the main WBL project(s), and is agreed with the university. The university role at this juncture is to ensure the coherence of the programme, and to confirm that ethical issues related to the proposed project and development work have been considered and addressed, as well as agreeing the title of

the award which reflects the area of work expertise. This planning module runs parallel to a research and development module which enables the learner to develop skills of critical appraisal, project planning and development in order to plan the project(s) that make up the rest of the programme. The research component has particular emphases upon aspects of WBL learning that are crucial within the projects. These include aspects such as the role of the worker/ insider researcher, the significance of the context in which the project is being undertaken, critical appraisal of the research and organisational or national policy literature that influences current practice, as well as the choice of a suitable research approach that reflects work environment discipline, culture and areas of inquiry. These considerations are explored more fully within this book (see Gibbs & Costley, chapter XX). Having successfully completed these components, the learner then progresses to the project stage, which enable him/her to explore areas of interest and relevance to the workplace and award title. WBL projects are aimed to facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge from academic, policy and work sources to contribute to the area of work expertise as well as making up credit deficit towards the final intended award, so there may be several projects within an award, especially within the undergraduate programme. Figure 1.1 gives a diagrammatic representation of the core curriculum and indicates how each stage builds on the previous learning.

Figure 1.1 Demonstration of the development of a WBL programme with the APEL module forming the basis of the claimants learning

(From Doncaster 2000)



Introduction to the book

The book is divided into four sections starting with this chapter as the first section which describes the Middlesex approach to work based learning, its origins and development and its growth to this point in its development. It has been going for fifteen years in its current form and like all true teenagers is increasingly flexing its muscles and pushing the boundaries of what has been known and practiced to this point. Section B discusses the variety of forms that WBL has taken in different schools and subject areas. While the core of the WBL programme remains the same, the interpretations and developments that each school has made, offers examples of the infinite possibilities that a flexible curriculum in WBL can offer. This section has a chapter from each of the school coordinators who have been working with the CEWBL over the first two years and shows how WBL has started at different points within the curriculum, but has then responded to the differing demands and styles of subject areas and adjusted within each school to make its own mark upon developments. Within this section there are also contributions from practitioners who have used WBL within specialist areas, such as the Doctoral programme, and professional developments across Europe. Section C explores themes of WBL in more depth and reflects the debates that are exercised by many inquirers about the programme, such as quality and assessment issues, as well as some of the core research themes that underpin the work. Finally, section D, the last chapter, reflects upon the past in relation to future developments of WBL.

Section B Case studies of application of the Middlesex approach to WBL

The section starts with Durrant discussing the development of a WBL programme at Masters Level within an Arts discipline. He explores the challenges this presents to a practice based education, and how the programme provided the unique opportunity for HE to recognise and accredit practice based knowledge. Durrant considers the WBL approach taken here offers a valuable route for the established art practitioner, and using illustrations from actual students experience with insights and perceptions of the programme, describes the consequential impact on lifelong learning both for the student and for the school. Durrant makes some useful observations about the supporting mechanisms within the school that contributed to the success of the programme. These include commitment from senior staff in recognising work programme allowances and the consequent impact that that has on the uptake and engagement with WBL by academics. Factors relating to WBL that have contributed to the teaching and learning practices within the arts discipline are identified and their contribution to the lifelong learning approach within an arts tradition are explored.

The next chapter discusses how the Business school is involved in a range of WBL modes, from placements through to modules which enable the acquisition of WBL skills as required by employers. The school has adopted the fourfold WBL curriculum but has used it within a different terminology of 'practice'. This in itself reflects the range of understanding of what constitutes WBL and how it can be described within different paradigms of work and is also reflected in the formal assessment requirements of professional bodies. Critten uses three case studies to illustrate the range of opportunities

that WBL has provided for the school, particularly in partnerships with employers, and suggests that such partnerships can make a significant contribution to the development of new subjects within the business curricula. He comments too, on the use of ICT as a learning tool and the piloting and contribution of new technologies to WBL programmes.

Frame focuses on a smaller dimension of work based learning within the full time Business student's undergraduate programme. He describes the use of a module to facilitate learning from work, with specific reflective processes to assist students in learning from the routine and mundane activities of part-time work. This module reflects the concept of WBL as a 'mode' of learning, rather than a 'field', but presents some sound strategies to facilitate all learners to develop their skills of articulating and evaluating learning in the light of experience. Students are encouraged to discover a variety of sources of learning from work and to be proactive in seeking support and direction in their careers. Frame uses some case study illustrations to make this process become powerfully alive.

Jabbar in chapter X describes the current position that WBL holds within the Computing Science School. He lays out the agenda of the school within the current contexts of lifelong learning, multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary concepts which support the science of computing, and identifies the many facets of related subjects that buttress computing and the technological challenges that face today's students and practitioners. As an area within the university that has come to WBL somewhat late in its development, he recognises the increasing attractiveness of WBL to computing science as a means of acknowledging the diverse and interconnecting knowledge and skills that computing practitioners must be acquainted with. He considers the CEWBL targets during its five years in relation to the experience and needs in Computing science, particularly the role that ICT takes in shaping the delivery of WBL programmes and the change of emphasis from theoretical to practice based learning, as filtered through the powerful lens of reflective learning. WBL is a new venture for computing science and while the potential benefits can be invoked, in reality things take longer to prove themselves and therefore this is a tentative acknowledgement of the introduction of WBL in computing, but one which recognises the immense possibilities that lie open before the field of computing science.

The School of Health and Social Sciences have been involved with WBL from early in its dissemination across the university, and have benefited from the opportunity to test its potential in a wide variety of situations and curriculum. Workman & Rounce identify a number of activities and features that have enabled integration of the WBL approaches into a broad based curriculum ranging from foundation to doctoral level, and across a number of social science related subject areas. This chapter discusses the circumstances that have conspired together to enable innovative programmes to be developed and contribute to a wide range of subject areas, but also how the flexibility of WBL modes of learning have enabled responsive creation of a wide range of programmes. However, they also identify some of the constraints which may emerge and which may hinder its developmental flow. They introduce the concept of a WBL continuum (Workman 2003, Costley 2006) which reflects the wide spectrum of WBL modes of delivery and

application. It also discusses the usefulness of accreditation of organisational training programmes in their contribution to the success of WBL programmes within the School.

The undergraduate curriculum is also discussed by Bellamy in chapter x, but here she explores the full time workers experience of being a student as described in their reflective writings generated from and running concurrently with their WBL programme activities. These are some significant insights into the power of WBL on an individual's learning, especially the impact upon the self that is engendered through the educational process. The students represented on this programme are often those who do not have the traditional forms of entry into higher education and this chapter demonstrates clearly the potential that WBL offers to non traditional students, as well as raising a number of issues in relation to accessibility of the curriculum and drivers for individual learning and professional development.

(Molly has been asked for a final, proofed and referenced article)

Foundation degrees are very topical in today's world of widening access and participation, and in some HEI's are considered to be the only form of WBL. Hilton, in chapter X, describes the development of a Foundation Degree (FD) in Early Childhood Studies that was created to raise the status of those working in the sector, who are often poorly paid and rewarded for their skills and knowledge. Drawing on her experience as a QAA reviewer of FD's, the programme design incorporated factors that had been seen to be effective in other FD's. The complexities of delivery in either HE or FE are considered, as well as the needs of different students and education providers. The issues related to WBL and the inclusion of employers within the programme development are explored bearing in mind the difficulties that face a service industry which is restrained by government legislation, but is not fully recognised for its skills and level of service requirements within its pay and career structures. Financial issues including sponsorships and student support are included as well as the implications for delivery of curriculum for those who are working and learning simultaneously outside the traditional HE structures and academic timescales.

Armsby and Costley consider WBL at the other end of the award spectrum in their chapter on the rise of the Doctorate in Professional Studies (DProf). They consider factors that have encouraged the growth of the programme, both nationally and internationally as well as some of the challenges presented to the DProf team that are essential to enable high level professional learning and development. They explore the pedagogy and philosophy underpinning the generic approach to doctorate study, and discuss key differences between the PhD and DProf approaches which have significant implications for both universities and doctoral students. The role of PhD supervisor as compared with the role of a DProf academic adviser is considered together with the resultant challenges that this brings in finding academics and high level professionals with appropriate skills and knowledge to act as advisers and consultants to DProf participants.

Portwood describes the development of a sister programme to the generic DProf – that of the Doctorate in Psychotherapy as developed through the Metanoia Institute of

psychotherapy and counselling. He discusses its development within the context of a community of scholarly practitioners who are contributing to their community of practice in the field of psychotherapy. A core element within this programme is that of the research approaches available to psychotherapy practitioners and he describes the development of research thinking and practice within this relatively new discipline, as it is influenced by the psychotherapeutic context, not least by the reflective components of the programme which link WBL learning approaches easily to the professional practices and beliefs of the practitioners. This chapter also reiterates some of the issues of academic support to the Doctoral candidates that Armsby and Costley have highlighted, not least the collegiality of the programme. The benefits of the programme in terms of the outcomes of doctoral research and output is noted as having an impact upon therapeutic approaches and models of practice, thus making a significant contribution to the wider profession.

Chapter X presents an interesting development of a post graduate programme for General Practice Vets emerging from within their profession. As part of a research project to explore the Continuous Profession Development (CPD) needs of Vets, the Professional Development Foundation entered into a three way partnership with the veterinary professional body and the then NCWBLP. Using the WBL programme framework, a vehicle to explore the professions post graduate needs was enabled and the resultant programme included recognition of the role of reflective practice as crucial in the professional development for practitioners. Self awareness and reflection upon professional and personal practice was identified as key to the development of the profession as a whole. This has now been taken up by the professional body and used within the community of practice.

(NB the above chapter needs a full BPS reference 2004)

Chapter 10 (?) *(needs a title)* by Nick and Andrew Hodges draws on their experience of using management science within the WBL framework, thus providing a route for managers to develop new insights, make sense of their experience and contribute to the world of management science by learning through their own role. Hodges and Hodges argue that using the specific management framework of ISO 9000 to frame their programmes, enables their clients to identify and articulate innovative and dynamic business practices which are not normally identified by academia until they become mainstream, by which time the industry has moved on, allowing theory to lag behind practice. This provides an interesting challenge to academia and supports Garnett's (2005?) notion of intellectual capital being generated from work.

The widening horizons of WBL and its spread outside the UK is represented by Light in her chapter detailing the 'quiet revolution' currently occurring in the EU as a result of funding from the European Union Socrates Grundtvig fund. Light describes the development of a WBL platform across several European countries through the DEWBLAM project and the gradual awakening of some to the possibilities that WBL offers, and the transformation of knowledge and epistemologies that have been battling against the traditional academic views of HE during the process.

Section C Themes in WBL development

A key focus of WBL at Middlesex is the use of accreditation of learning, both at individual and organizational levels, as being central to the building of individualized programmes. The following two chapters by Light and Rounce demonstrate the potential for both individuals and organizations to gain through accredited learning.

Light discusses a management development programme which was designed and developed to meet the needs of small and medium enterprises. She recounts the significant shift required for HE to accommodate some of the learning generated through this programme, both as a facilitator and for the university. She highlights the differences between recognition of learning that is generated from work as opposed to that generated from the academy and considers some of the implications this has for participants on such a programme. Rounce (Chapter X) discusses the role of partnership between the university and the organization and identifies issues which may challenge or undermine strong partnerships. This is set within a case study which illustrates some of the complexities to be found when working in partnership, and which accompany the developmental thinking and actions that may be required by both parties to achieve a successful outcome. Both chapters raise the issue of alternative sources of knowledge production, external to HE and raise important questions as to what the consequences may be for higher education.

Workman in chapter X (? 12) considers aspects of teaching, learning and assessment within the WBL curriculum. She positions these within adult learning theory and applies them to the practice of WBL through the use of case studies to illustrate the diversity of application. Of interest to those who are considering the creation of WBL programmes or who are concerned with the coherence of the programme through the full range of higher education academic levels, is the use of level descriptors as designed by MU for the WBL programme and the application to individual components of the programme.

Garnett on QA – no chapter available at this point

Costley and Gibbs in Chapter X (? 15) focus on the research undertaken by CEWBL academics in the broad area of WBL and reflect upon a wide range of issues in an emerging field of enquiry. They identify the themes of research that are currently prevalent within the WBL domain and that are emerging from the CEWBL research centre and consider some of the underlying themes, theories and related fields of enquiry. They raise questions related to issues of recognition and funding of a research area that is not yet mainstream but which challenges traditional academic thinking and practice. The key themes that are currently being explored in WBL research are those of reflexivity, insider –researcher and ethical issues as well as the transformation of a practitioner from non-researcher to researcher.

Section D Future directions

No chapters available to me at this point.

Word count 4471 including refs

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